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LUMEN UNITED REFORMED CHURCH

*A multi-faith church in London by
Theis and Khan Architects – p28*

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Photographer Robert
Polidori captures
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AN ACT OF FAITH

Theis and Khan's multi-faith Lumen United Reformed Church is assured, uncomplicated and just plain nice, writes *Kester Rattenbury*. Photography by *Nick Kane*

I know it's unfashionable to praise something for being calm, simple and well made. I know design is supposed to have attitude and rhetoric, or break new ground, and that criticism of it should be edgy and polemical. But with Theis and Khan Architects' multi-faith Lumen United Reformed Church, I don't think that approach is going to work.

The project has a very contemporary theme: the provision of space and support for the local multi-faith community and for leisure activities such as yoga and salsa classes. 'In effect,' says practice director Patrick Theis, 'this was an ambitious, generous outreach project, at least partly through architecture.'

The 1960s church, located on the corner of Tavistock Place and Wakefield Street in Bloomsbury, London, sits on larger 1820s foundations, the remains of a Second World War bombing raid. Theis and Khan's design retains the original building's volume and coherence, but new amenities – an entrance, a lift, toilets, offices, multi-use spaces and a courtyard garden – wrap around it, along what

used to be awkward access to the car park. The plan also opens up diagonally from the new entrance, across the existing church volume that now houses a quite different programme and sequence of spaces culminating in the cloister and garden. 'It sounds corny, but you are always moving towards the light,' says Theis. It's a major re-ordering of the architectural form that a church embodies, but it feels utterly modest.

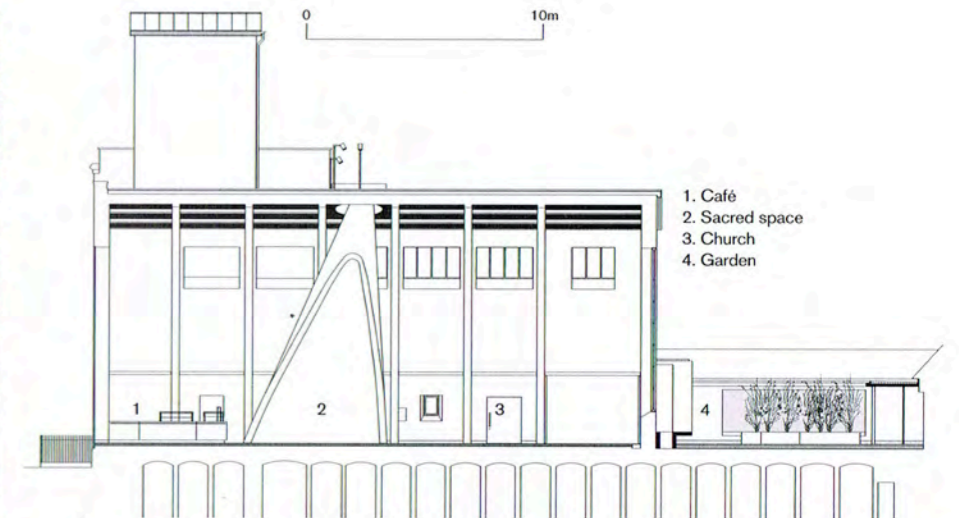
Theis and Khan was recommended to Lumen United Reformed Church following a small commission in neighbouring Somers Town, where it designed a door for a community centre. Lumen's original brief was tiny: install a permanent café within the church and sort out disabled access, but the practice quickly found that its client was open to how much more could be done.

The expanded brief was partly driven by the size of Lumen's congregation – it has a core of just nine people. Basically, the church had far too much space. Lumen welcomes other faiths and realised it could offer a >>



Rona Smith's geometric window sculpture

Left The sacred space forms the interior of the church hall
 Clockwise from below The church elevation on Tavistock Place; Section; View from garden to community room; Back garden



broader community facility. Theis and Khan suggested it sell off the Wakefield Street halls behind the site, and use the money to build and run a more viable and coherent building within the church and its car park perimeter.

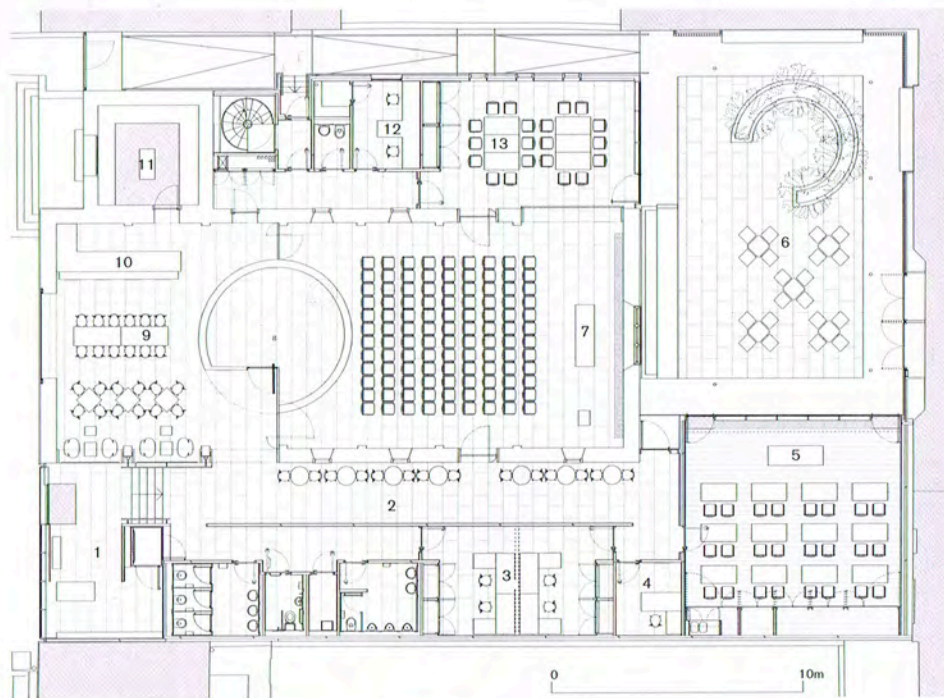
Theis and Khan's main gesture is the sacred space inserted within the church hall. Symbolically, this could be read as a church retrenching – shrinking from extensive 1820s foundations through to a smaller 1960s box, and culminating in a tiny 21st-century spot

– but Theis and Khan has turned this into a generous move. The space is dominated by a Corbusian cone, which practice director Soraya Khan describes as 'a piece of furniture' and resembles a solidified ray of light. Made from rendered polystyrene and with pivoting doors, the cone is central in plan, but angled due east, funnelling the sky – which can also be seen through a new skylight cut into the roof above.

It's a simple idea, but it absolutely >>

The space is dominated by a Corbusian cone that resembles a solidified ray of light

- 1. Reception
- 2. Gallery
- 3. Community room
- 4. Office
- 5. Community room
- 6. Garden
- 7. Church
- 8. Garden
- 9. Café
- 10. Servery
- 11. Kitchen
- 12. Office
- 13. Community room



works. It has the surprise effect of functioning like a matt kaleidoscope, scattering the colours cast by an original 1960s stained glass window, now relocated to the south wall.

Vivien Lovell, founder of Modus Operandi Art Consultants, wrote Camden Council's arts policy and commissioned two artists for this project. Rona Smith designed the geometric sculpture in the window, which Theis and Khan enlarged by dropping its sill height, and sculptor Alison Wilding, twice nominated for the Turner Prize, created a font, a fountain and a stoup.

Other moves unify the project, such as the cloister canopy that wraps and folds the buildings bordering the garden behind the church. The canopy begins at high level over the glazed volumes of the new community halls, drops to edit the awkward eaves of the Wakefield Street halls, and then falls to bench height in front of the church hall. 'It recalls Álvaro Siza's Serralves Museum,' says Khan, but the practice's references go beyond Modernism: the diagonal spatial sequence is Arts and Crafts-inspired.

Theis and Khan's reworking of the church reveals a deep, natural designerliness. They don't talk much about it, but the proportions of every single space have been thoroughly considered. Even the internal offices along the west wall are made generous by the overscaled, cheap-as-chips circular rooflights, which give a huge view of the sky. The plan functions brilliantly – the big hall can be used as a crèche when the church is closed, but it still has 'ownership' of the garden and views. 'We are instinctive architects, not academic ones,' says Khan.

The project is also beautifully built. KLH, the lovely structural kit of cross-laminated timber panels that clamp into place, is used for the new construction. The original concrete structure didn't need cleaning, and roof slats were painted white with acoustic material squeezed invisibly between them. The budget was 'never luxurious', but the construction process was remarkably calm. The contractor ended up donating the cross, planting was given by Theis and Khan, and there was no blame ethos. 'Everyone

Left Floor plan

Bottom left Theis and Khan has broadened the church's footprint to create a gallery

This page, clockwise

from right The café;

Looking up through the sacred space; Stoup and fountain designed by Alison Wilding

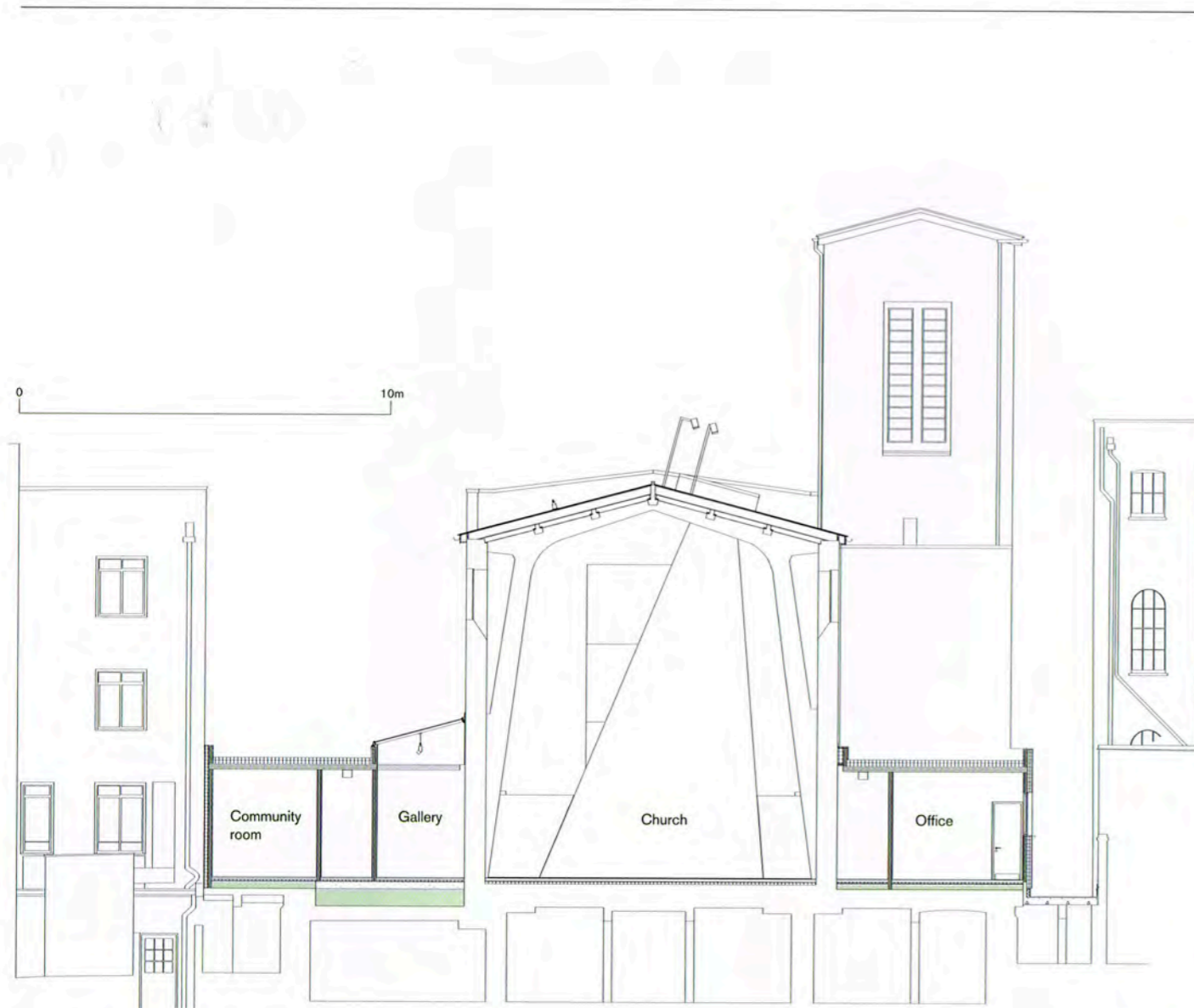


worked hard together,' says Khan. 'You don't have to put people under pressure to get a good result.'

Nor, it seems, do you have to be edgy and polemical. Rather than finding a drive in this project's tensions, Theis and Khan found a common ground of instinctive, generous simplicity. It's assured Modernism, as if the battlegrounds of Post-Modernism, High-Tech and Deconstructivism had never happened.

A visit to the revitalised church could give the impression that we are still in that early stage of generous, liberal Modernist optimism. It's strange to observe how anachronistic, how marvellously sensible and just plain nice that feels. ■

Start on site date June 2007
Contract duration 12 months
Gross external floor area 890m²
Form of contract SBC05 without quantities
Total cost £1.8 million
Client United Reformed Church
Architect Theis and Khan Architects
Structural engineer F J Samuely
Services engineer EngDesign
Quantity surveyor Boyden and Company
Lighting consultant George Sexton Associates
Planning supervisor DPK Associates
Main contractor Dollman Ralston
Annual CO₂ emissions 34kgCO₂/m²



LUMEN UNITED REFORMED CHURCH

Theis and Khan Architects
Sacred space rooflight



The new conical sacred space penetrates the existing church roof, primarily to receive direct natural light.

The rooflight opening is centred between existing concrete portal frames and required the removal of one concrete purlin. The position of the sacred space at floor level is centred on the existing structural portal frame. This meant the cone needed to lean south east towards the nearest available point where the

roof could be penetrated.

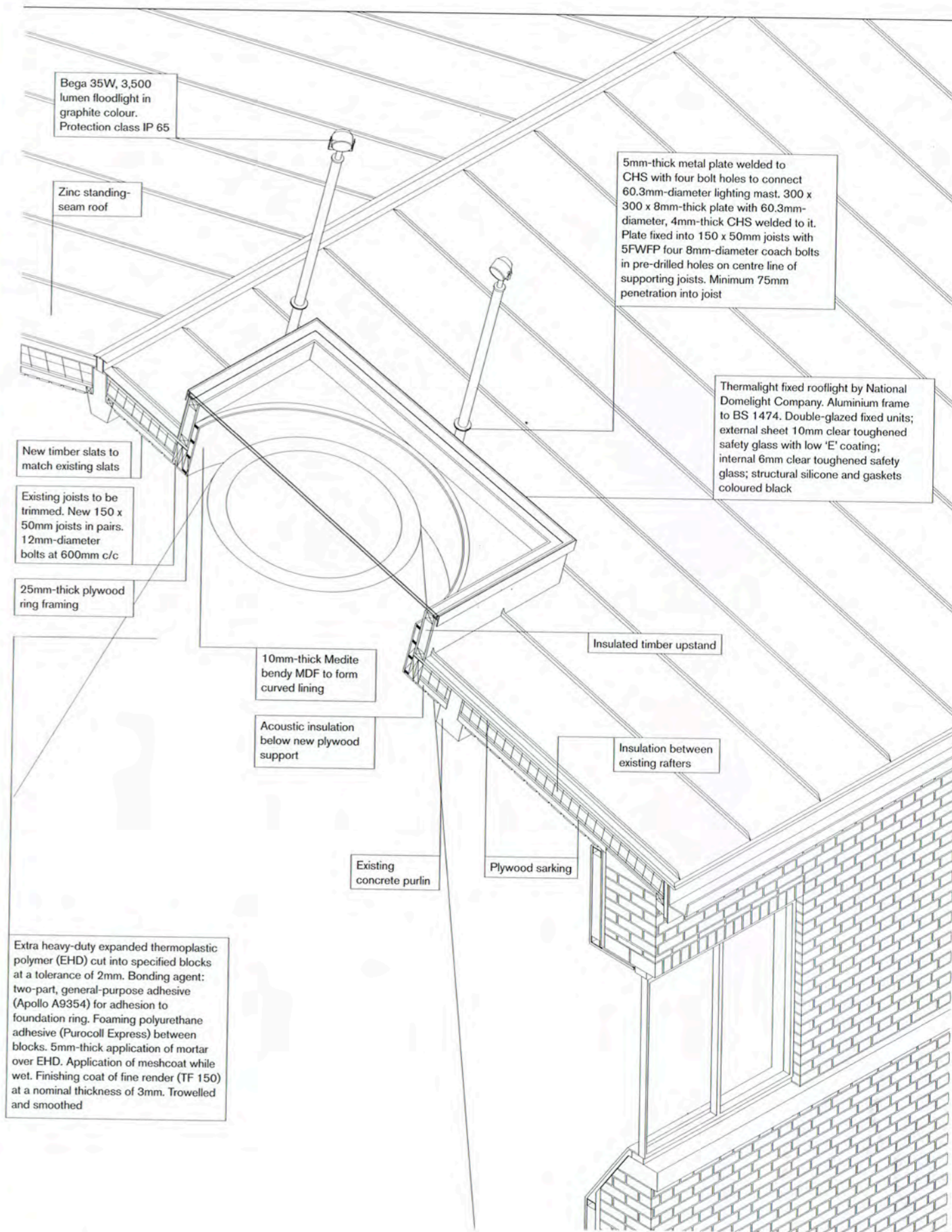
The rooflight utilises a 2.1 x 2.1m fixed double-glazed unit. It was the largest standard unit available and the most cost-effective solution. The circular opening formed in the existing slatted timber soffit is approximately 250mm wider all round than the top of the cone, to allow light to wash the exterior of its form.

Three roof-mounted external spotlights on stalks create an artificial light source for the

sacred space in the evenings.

The cone is stopped 100mm short of the inside of the rooflight glass to allow ventilation via the main space. This gap creates a lighting effect within the sacred space when natural daylight fades. With the sacred space unlit and the main church space fully lit, light spills into the top of the cone and creates a subtle corona, much like a solar eclipse.

Patrick Theis, director, Theis and Khan Architects



Extra heavy-duty expanded thermoplastic polymer (EHD) cut into specified blocks at a tolerance of 2mm. Bonding agent: two-part, general-purpose adhesive (Apollo A9354) for adhesion to foundation ring. Foaming polyurethane adhesive (Purocoll Express) between blocks. 5mm-thick application of mortar over EHD. Application of meshcoat while wet. Finishing coat of fine render (TF 150) at a nominal thickness of 3mm. Trowelled and smoothed